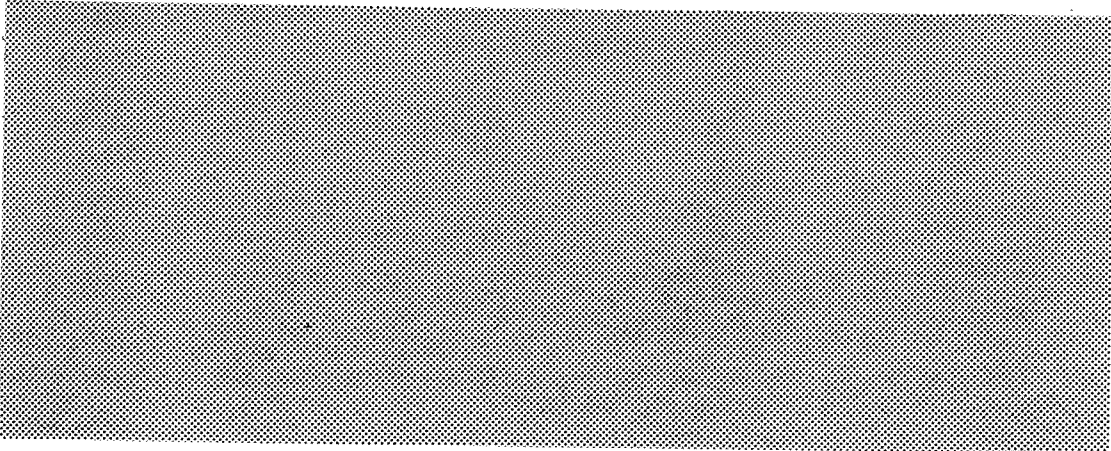




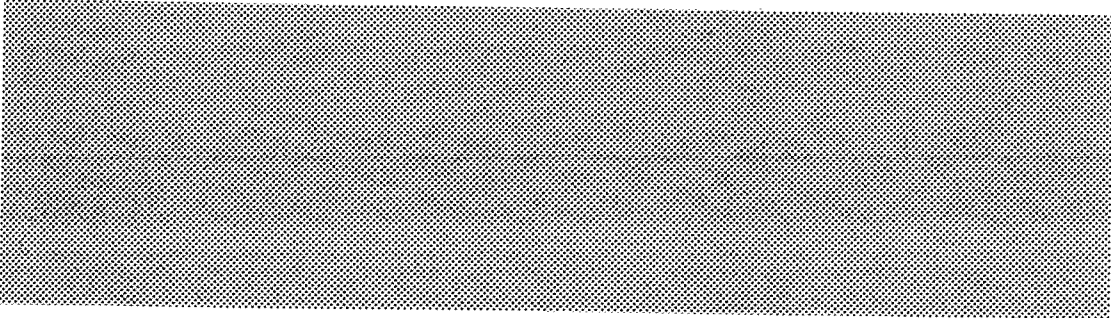
**FIVE HOUSES ON
AVERS AVENUE
DISTRICT**

1942, 1950, 1952, 1958, AND 2102 SOUTH AVERS AVENUE, CHICAGO, ILLINOIS



*PRELIMINARY STAFF SUMMARY OF INFORMATION, SUBMITTED TO THE
COMMISSION ON CHICAGO LANDMARKS*

JULY, 1990



FIVE HOUSES ON AVERS AVENUE DISTRICT
1942, 1950, 1952, 1958, and 2102 South Avers Avenue
Chicago, Illinois

Dates of Construction: 1892-94

Probable Architect: Frederick B. Townsend

During the nineteenth century, immigrants to the United States, and to Chicago in particular, tended to settle in enclaves with their fellow countrymen. Each community furnished a culturally and linguistically familiar environment that provided mechanisms to assist and encourage their members in dealing with the largely unfamiliar dominant culture. A web of family, social, and business relationships made these communities self-contained and somewhat self-sufficient, and they served as the catalysts for the upward mobility of individuals and, by extension, the growth of the community as a whole.

This general pattern of development was reflected in the experience of immigrants from Bohemia and Moravia, whose shared language is Czech, in the founding and development of their community in Chicago. Beginning in the 1850s, Czech immigrants settled west of the downtown area in the vicinity of Desplaines and Randolph streets. Named "Prague" after the capitol of Bohemia, the limited housing stock in this section made it inadequate for the rapidly growing population. After the Great Fire of 1871, the focus of the community shifted to 18th Street between Halsted Street and Ashland Avenue on the Southwest Side. The proximity of a number of large industrial employers and a wide area of undeveloped land available for new housing made it an attractive site. Taking its name from the second largest city in Bohemia, "Pilsen" became the center of the Czech community for the next fifty years.

The Czechs shared a common history with other Eastern European ethnic groups in that they had no recent history of independent national identity. Like the Hungarians, Slovaks, Slovenes, and the Poles of Galicia, the Czechs lived under the authority of the Empire of Austria-Hungary, and their language was officially suppressed in education and public life. Unique among these linguistic groups, however, was the diversity of belief and activity expressed within the Czech community. The Poles, for example, were in the vast

majority members of the Roman Catholic Church, and it assumed a role as the voice, sponsor, and unifying force of the community, whether in Europe or in the United States. In contrast, Czechs founded Catholic and Protestant churches, participated in an active "Free Thought" movement, and were prevalent in the early labor reform and union movements. Lacking a common religious belief or tradition of nationalism, the Czechs made language and culture the consonant themes of their community through theater, music, education, and athletics. Essential to the movement to reinforce Czech traditions was the establishment of the Sokol organization during the 1860s in Bohemia. The Sokols were local clubs of a secular nature, connected with one another through regional and international associations, designed to promote the physical development and cultural traditions of Czech-speaking peoples. Athletic events, poetry readings, and theatrical and musical productions were staged in a spirit of friendly competition to cultivate the notion of ethnic solidarity. The success of the movement was reflected in the popularity of the quadrennial gathering of all clubs, the "Sokol Slet," modeled loosely on the ancient Olympic Games. Although they specifically avoided political activities, the founders of the Sokols in Bohemia and the United States recognized the need to organize the diverse interests represented by their people around a common purpose before any attempt to realize political independence would be practical.

The upward mobility of individuals in Chicago's Pilsen, their familial interactions, and the influence of social associations on the expansion of the community, are illustrated by the development of the Five Houses on Avers Avenue. Through the efforts of Jan (John) Kralovec, a Czech contractor and real estate developer, a particular group of individuals came together to form the nucleus of a newly developing residential community.

Jan Kralovec was born March 13, 1849 in Domazlice, a town in the easternmost region of present-day Czechoslovakia. He was educated in the local school and served an apprenticeship as a bricklayer in his native town. Kralovec emigrated to the United States in 1868, making the journey across the Atlantic aboard the "Magdalena," a sailboat that required six weeks to complete the crossing. Apparently acting on the advice of an acquaintance, he arrived in Chicago within a week of landing in New York. Through the local community, he quickly found his first job as a laborer in a lumberyard on the South Branch of the Chicago River. By the spring of 1870 he was working as a bricklayer, leading to his joining the German bricklayers union and to work on a number of major buildings in the Loop, including the Pacific Hotel. After the Great Fire of 1871, the demand for bricklayers, and consequently the wages they could command, was high. Although the depression of 1873 temporarily slowed the rebuilding process, by 1875 Kralovec had established a successful contracting partnership and acted as a co-founder of a Czech bricklayers union.

Jan's brother James M. Kralovec joined him in Chicago sometime in the late 1870s. After completing his studies at a business college, James joined Jan to form a general contracting firm under the name of Jan Kralovec and Brother in 1883. This firm specialized in the construction of small single-family homes, most of which were built on speculation but marketed to the Czech community.

In 1890, the Kralovec brothers went their separate professional ways. James established his own construction firm which he ran until going into the insurance business in 1905. From 1909 to 1911, James served on the Chicago Board of Education. He was joined in partnership by his son in 1912 and continued in the family's insurance company until about 1930. James M. Kralovec died on November 21, 1934.

Jan Kralovec gradually discontinued his work as a contractor, preferring to concentrate on real estate and the subdivision and development of open tracts of land. Many of the homes he built after 1890 were located south and west of Pilsen in neighborhoods that became known as "Ceska Kalifornia" (Czech California), located south of Douglas Park and west of California Avenue, and "Novy Tabor" (New Tabor, after a town in Bohemia), located south of Independence Square Park, west of Central Park Avenue.

Early in 1892, Jan took note of the pending construction of a new streetcar line on West 22nd Street (now Cermak Road), to extend from Ashland Avenue in Pilsen to the intersection of Ogden Avenue and Pulaski Road in Lawndale. At the time, this area was largely undeveloped, and the streetcar was deemed a necessary precondition for its settlement. Kralovec took advantage of the possibilities presented to him by the new means of transport: his real estate office was located at 2011 South Laflin Avenue, one block east and two blocks north of the line's eastern end, and he began to buy tracts along its length and at the western end for future speculation. Like his potential customers, Kralovec had lived in Pilsen, on Blue Island Avenue, for many years. Taking the personal initiative to establish the character of the westernmost section as a high-style enclave, he decided to build a new home for his family at that location.

One of the distinguishing characteristics of the Five Houses on Avers Avenue as a group is the unusual size of the lots on which they were built. Each of the Five Houses stands on a parcel with fifty feet of street frontage, placing them in considerable contrast with those they face to the east and those north of them on Avers which were built much later on twenty-five-foot lots. This pattern of subdivision, where the lots created were wide enough to allow each building to be freestanding, was characteristic of Kralovec's later developments on Springfield and Harding avenues. On those streets, which are immediately to the west of Avers Avenue, the Kralovec subdivisions include lots of thirty-two to thirty-six feet frontage, rather than the conventional twenty-five feet (Figure 1).

Kralovec chose as his architect Frederick B. Townsend, a native of Somerville, Massachusetts, born in 1853, who had studied architecture at Harvard University. His studies were cut short by the death of his father, and he rejoined his family in Washington, D.C., where he began his career as a draftsman. Arriving in Chicago in 1877, Townsend worked in the office of the architect L. B. Dixon and was made a partner in the firm in 1881. The partnership was dissolved after three years, and each founded an independent practice. During the years 1885 through 1887, Townsend concentrated most of his energy on high-style residential design. Among the single-family residences he designed were those of Daniel L. Shorey, president of the Western Unitarian Conference, located on Woodlawn Avenue in Hyde Park; Walter M. Howland, a lawyer, at 1336 North State Street;

John J. P. Odell, president of the Union National Bank, at 1341 North State Street; and Charles T. Nash, principal partner in a commission merchandising firm, at 329 South Ashland Avenue. None of these structures remains standing. In 1886, Townsend also completed the reconstruction of the Unity Church on Washington Square Park, presently occupied by the Scottish Rite Cathedral. The building, which had been badly damaged in the Great Fire of 1871 and never completely renovated, received two new towers and an interior reconstruction from plans by Townsend.

The first building built on the street, the Jan Kralovec House at 2102 South Avers Avenue, was also to be the largest and was probably intended to serve as a showpiece for what the neighborhood could become. The permit for the house was issued on October 17, 1892, and in its "building notes" section, the *Economist* of November 19, 1892, included the following entry:

Frederick B. Townsend has finished plans for a 2 story, basement, and attic residence, 28 x 62 feet, to be erected at Lawndale for J. Kralovec. It will be of stone front, have hardwood finish interiors, steam heating, electric light, and cost \$15,000.

The house is an imposing example of the Richardsonian Romanesque style, with a coach-house of matching design and materials (Figures 2 & 3). The dominant feature of the elevation is a three-story, circular plan tower topped with a conical roof. The facade was built of rusticated Indiana limestone with a battered foundation wall. The stone was laid in courses of alternating height, giving a sense of rhythmic order to the aggressively textured surface. Ashlar-faced stone was used to emphasize the framing elements around the windows, particularly in the arches, and in the belt courses that delineate the floors. The first-floor window and portal on the body of the building are segmental arch openings trimmed with Gothic-inspired moldings, and the windows on the second and third floors above them have round arches without moldings. Stone tourelles bracket the upper floors, providing support for the decorative copper raking cornices, and project above the roof lines to terminate in decorative spiral designs. The gable has a copper panel whose foliate design is loosely based on Romanesque prototypes. The tower provides contrasts, in that all of its windows are rectilinear in elevation while being curved in plan. The pattern of stone work on the tower is identical to that on the foundation, first, and second floors of the facade but has a distinct checkerboard pattern on its third floor, below the windows. Doric pilasters separate the third-floor tower windows and support an unadorned cornice. The conical roof of the tower has a bell-cast shape, and at one time it was topped by a decorative copper finial (Figure 2).

A design element found here that was very unusual for houses of this period is the extension of pressed brick, ornamental elements, and the third-floor copper trim around to the north and south sides of the building. Kralovec clearly intended that his house be seen as a free-standing entity, rather than as part of an uninterrupted series of facades, occupying the center of its large lot and dominating its surroundings by virtue of its size, scale, materials, and design.

The coachhouse continues the essential design themes set forth in the house, having a rusticated limestone facade and pressed brick sides. The main vehicular entrance is a segmental arch opening, reflecting the shape of the main portal of the house, and the design of the second floor of the coachhouse, which has a pair of round-arched windows under a gable, is identical to that employed on the third-floor of the body of the facade. A copper panel set into the gable of the coachhouse has been removed, leaving a scar that is the same size and shape as that in the gable of the house (Figure 3).

Seven months after the permit for the Kralovec House was issued, additional permit applications were filed for the neighboring lots to the north. The original address numbers of these three buildings, 969, 975, and 981 South Avers Avenue, indicated their close proximity to one another. However, when the City standardized its street numbering system in 1911, the address numbers on Avers, Springfield, and Harding avenues somehow skipped the 2000-block altogether. This is the reason for the confusing succession of addresses in the district. Under normal circumstances, the Kralovec House at 2102 South Avers would be expected to be found over a block away from the other four buildings, which have numbers in the 1900-block, when in fact they are neighbors.

The building permits for 1952 and 1958 South Avers were issued on May 6, 1893. John Krupka, the owner of the parcel at 1952 South Avers, was the secretary of the Pilsen Lumber Company. An active member of the Desplaines Avenue ("Prague") Sokol, he and his brother Frank had served as officers in the organization. John also made a return trip to Bohemia on a tour sponsored by the United American Sokols association in 1887. The owner of the lots at 1958 South Avers, John Miksak, was the president of the Pilsen Lumber Company and had been its founder in 1888. Miksak was an influential member of St. Procopius Catholic Church in Pilsen where he established the local lodge of the Knights of St. George, now known as the Knights of Columbus, in 1879. Miksak and Krupka had lived in the same building at 1808 South Racine Avenue in Pilsen for a number of years before moving to their new, neighboring residences on Avers Avenue. The offices of the Pilsen Lumber Company were located at 22nd Street and Laflin Avenue, one block east of the end of the new streetcar line at Ashland Avenue, and less than two blocks from Jan Kralovec's real estate office.

The relationship Miksak and Krupka enjoyed with Kralovec had its basis in shared cultural and business interests. Kralovec's continuing work in the development of his tracts in the "Ceska Kalifornia" and "Novy Tabor" neighborhoods demanded a good working relationship with those who, like the Pilsen Lumber Company, produced the materials necessary for construction. The apparent cooperation between Kralovec, Miksak, and Krupka demonstrates clear and concerted efforts to realize the expansion of the Czech community. The long-term nature of this relationship is implied by the actions Kralovec took on the neighboring streets of Springfield and Harding. Between November, 1905, and November, 1908, Kralovec was listed as the owner on building permits for thirteen two-flats, eleven of brick and two in frame construction, on the 1900- and 2100-blocks of these streets, which represents only a part of his work during those years.

The John Miksak House, 1958 South Avers, is a two-and-a-half-story, single-family residence with a bell-cast hip roof over its front bay (Figure 4). Like the Jan Kralovec House, it has a rusticated limestone facade and pressed brick sides with elaborate detailing. Unlike the Kralovec House, however, is the amount of sculptural detail on the facade which is particularly evident in the reliefs on the string course and voussoir of the first-floor bay window and in the false gable on the third floor above the portal. These details, as well as the type and texture of the material, were inspired by the Richardsonian Romanesque, however the design of the porch and the ornate articulation in the brick of the chimney on the south side relate it more closely to the eclectic Queen Anne style.

The neighboring house of John Krupka, 1952 South Avers, is virtually identical to the Miksak House, save for the alterations that have occurred to a few details over time (Figure 5). While this may not be surprising, considering the close business relationship these men enjoyed and the fact that they had previously lived as neighbors elsewhere, it is not common to find two buildings whose plans, elevations, materials, details, and even dates of construction are so identical.

The importance of the relationships between Kralovec, Miksak, and Krupka is given further emphasis by the participation of Frank C. Layer in the development of the Five Houses on Avers. Layer was a contractor and major stockholder in the Builder's Brick Company when, on August 23, 1893, he applied for a building permit for his land at 1950 South Avers Avenue. Layer was born in Bohemia on August 19, 1860, and received his education before emigrating to the United States in 1877. Trained as a bricklayer and apparently a member of the Bohemian bricklayers union that Kralovec co-founded, he started a contracting firm with his brother Emanuel in the late 1880s. A founding member of the Pilsen Sokol at Ashland Avenue and 18th Street, Layer also served as a member of its by-laws committee. By 1906, he held enough stock in the Builder's Brick Company to be named its president, a position he held through the second decade of the century.

The house that Frank C. Layer built at 1950 South Avers Avenue was a large single-family residence that shared a number of design characteristics with its distinguished neighbors. Like the Kralovec, Miksak, and Krupka houses, the Layer House has a rusticated limestone facade and sides that are finished to an unusual degree through the use of pressed brick and stone details (Figure 6). The intricacy of the details, particularly in the carved Palladian window trim of the first-floor bay, and in the elaborate pressed metal cornices that wrap around three of the building's sides, effectively contribute to its monumental aspect. On a street of well-preserved residences, the Frank C. Layer House is one that retains an exceptionally high degree of integrity, having many of its original details and exterior fixtures intact. Unique among the Five Houses on Avers Avenue, the Frank C. Layer House was apparently never occupied by its owner and was used as a rental residence.

The last of the Five Houses to be built demonstrates an entirely different interpersonal relationship in the ethnic community, yet one that was of primary importance, namely the family. The building at 1942 South Avers was built as a two-flat for Antonie Kubin,

the widow of Martin Kubin and sister-in-law of Jan Kralovec's wife, Julia Kubin Kralovec. Julia's brother, Martin Kubin, died in late 1892 or early 1893, apparently causing changes in the original plan of the house they were to build on Avers Avenue. The building permit for the Antonie Kubin Residence was issued March 20, 1894, for a brick and stone two-flat. The least ornate of the group of Five Houses, it was also the smallest, least expensive, and the most vernacular in design (Figure 7). In spite of its smaller scale, however, the Kubin Residence has a number of design features in common with the others, including a limestone facade that is articulated by alternating rusticated and ashlar courses of stone, and an elaborate pressed metal cornice. The widowed Mrs. Kubin apparently lived on the two upper floors and rented the first floor to supplement her income.

The Five Houses on Avers Avenue reveal a consistent design concept as an ensemble of residences with high-style pretensions. The source of this concept can be traced to Jan Kralovec as the developer and central figure around whom the social, business, and familial relationships of the owners revolved. However, the realization of the concept was the responsibility of the architect. From the architect's point of view, the opportunity to design a number of large residences in such close proximity to one another must have appeared valuable. Both architect and developer would be able to make use of a group such as the Five Houses on Avers Avenue as a marketing tool for future developments. Documentation collected to date has confirmed Frederick B. Townsend as the architect only of the Jan Kralovec House, 2102 South Avers Avenue. It is likely, however, that as the architect hired to design the new home for the person responsible for the development on the street, Townsend would be recommended for the commissions for the other residences. The circumstantial evidence supporting an attribution of all five houses to Townsend is enhanced by the fact that all of them were constructed between October, 1892 and the summer of 1894, a period of less than two years.

In his later years, Jan Kralovec continued the effort started by the development of the Five Houses on Avers Avenue to create new housing for the Czech community of Lawndale. A small part of that effort is demonstrated by his subdivisions on Springfield and Harding avenues, just west of Avers Avenue (Figure 1). In addition, he served as a Commissioner on the West Parks Board and became known in the community as a generous benefactor. Among the charities he patronized were the Bohemian Home for the Aged and Orphaned, and the Bohemian Charitable Association, in Chicago; St. Joseph's Catholic Orphanage, now Illinois Benedictine College, in Lisle; and after 1918, the Home for the Blind in Deylov, the American Home in Brno, the Home for the Poor in Domazlice, and a hospital for crippled children in Cernovice, all in the newly established Republic of Czechoslovakia. Kralovec was eight-two years old when he died in an automobile accident in front of his home at 2102 South Avers Avenue on February 27, 1931. One of his eight children, Emil G. Kralovec, had joined him in the real estate business after passing the bar in 1916 and continued the family enterprise into the 1940s with developments in the Czech community of Chicago and the near western suburbs.

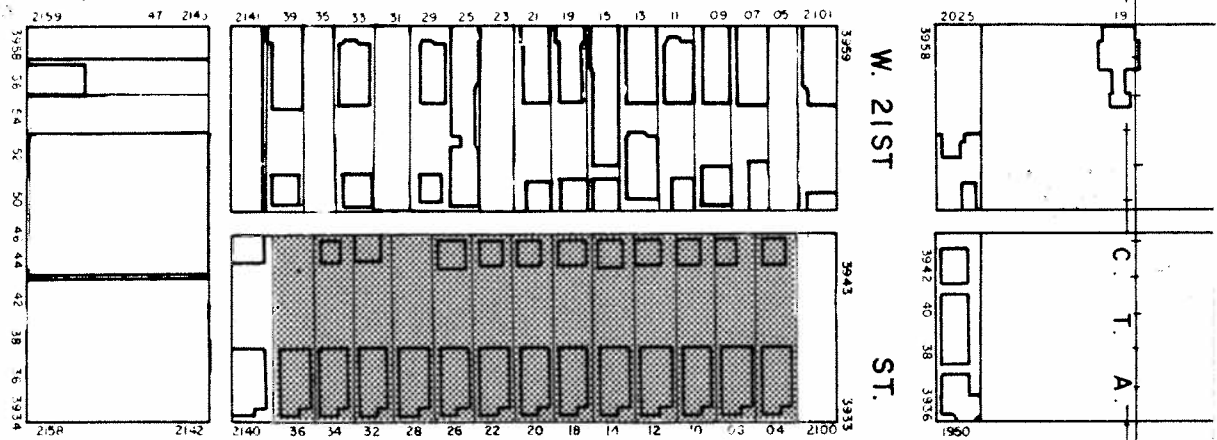
The Five Houses on Avers Avenue are outstanding in their community by virtue of their size, scale, materials, and their overall designs and details. In a community that

placed a great deal of value on cultural heritage and social relationships, as well as having a belief in the ideal of home ownership, it is not surprising to find a group of individuals who embodied these elements and were responsible for furthering community development. The architectural qualities of these buildings and the associations that linked their original owners on all levels of the life in their ethnic community demonstrate the expansion and growth of individual and collective achievement among the Czechs of Chicago.

Figure 1: Map of the vicinity of South Avers Avenue, West Ogden Avenue, and West Cermak Road. The Cermak Road streetcar line was extended from Ashland Avenue in Pilsen to Pulaski Road in 1893, making the future Lawndale community accessible by public transit for the first time. The Czech residents of Pilsen saw this area as a natural extension of their community. Actively engaging in its development, they christened new settlements along the line “Ceska Kalifornia” (Czech California), south of Cermak at California Avenue, and “Novy Tabor” (New Tabor, after a village in Bohemia), between Independence Square Park and Cermak, west of Central Park Avenue.

The Five Houses on Avers, which were among the first residences constructed in the area, were apparently the inspiration of John Kralovec, a prominent real estate developer in the Czech community. His home at 2102 South Avers Avenue, the other four houses on Avers, and his subsequent activities in developing the immediately surrounding community are indicated.

S. PULASKI

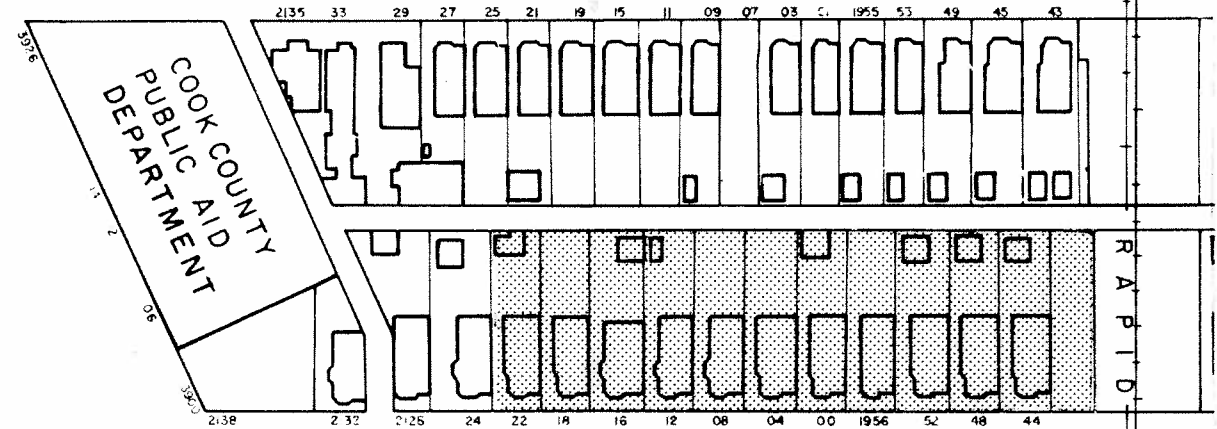


W. 21ST

ST.

C. T. A.

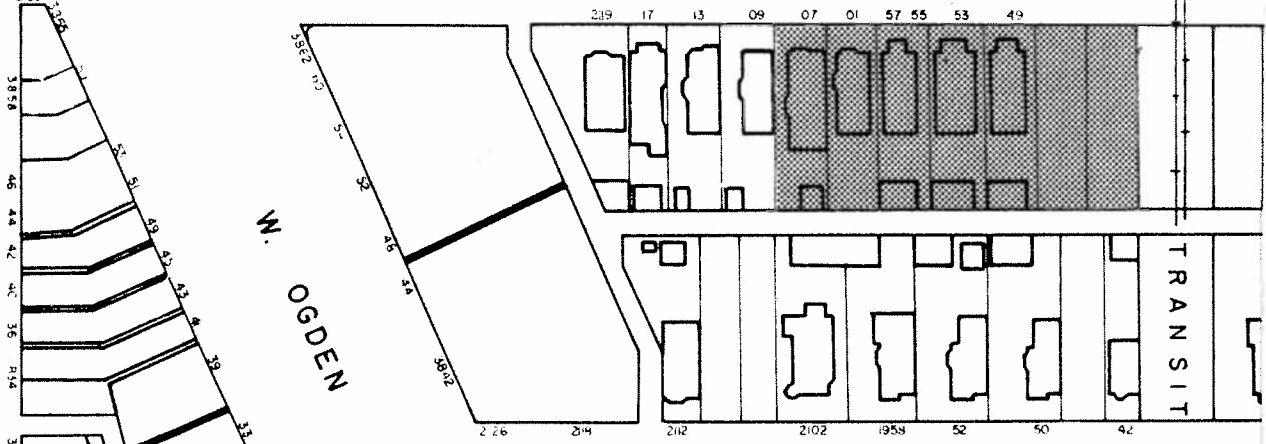
S. HARDING



COOK COUNTY
PUBLIC AID
DEPARTMENT

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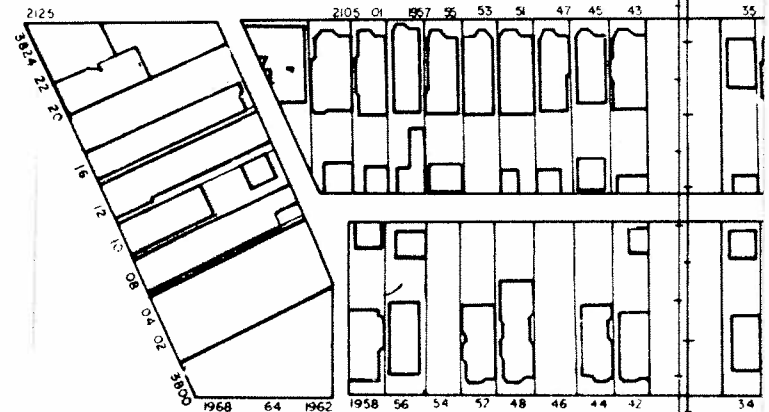
S. SPRINGFIELD



W. OGDEN

T R A N S I T

S. AVERS



S. HAMLIN

W. CERMAK



The Five Houses on Avers Avenue,
built in 1892 through 1894.



Jan Kralovec's Subdivision,
recorded in 1905.



Jan Kralovec's Subdivision,
recorded in 1908.

Figure 2: General view of the John Kralovec House, 2102 South Avers Avenue, built from a design by Frederick B. Townsend in 1892-93. The first of the Five Houses on Avers to be built, it was also the largest, a showplace for its owner and keystone for his later development activities in the community. Kralovec lived in this building until his death in 1931.

(Photograph by Elizabeth S. Borden for the Chicago Historic Resources Survey)

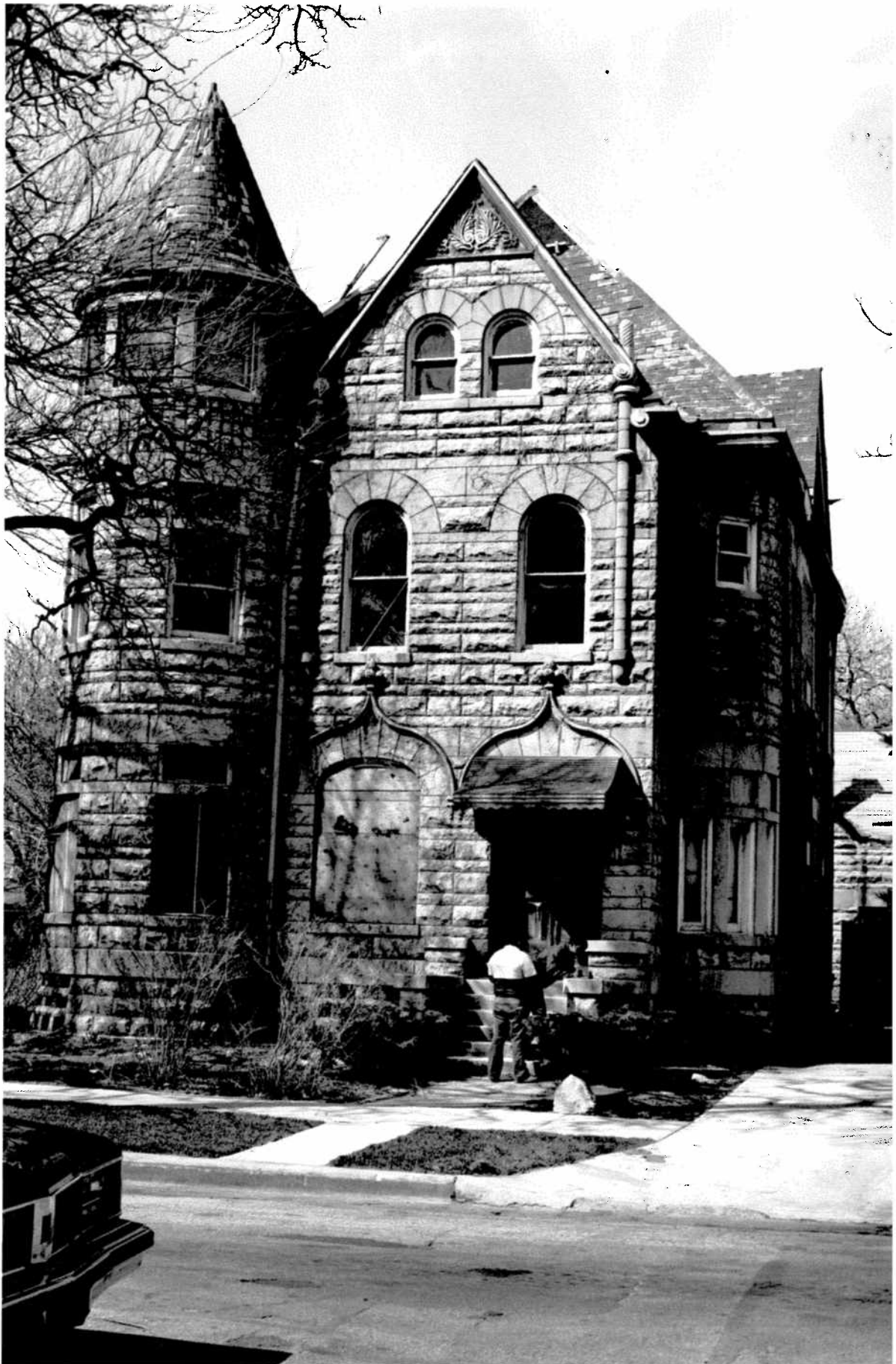


Figure 3: View of the coachhouse behind the John Kralovec House, 2102 South Avers Avenue. Although the coachhouse has lost its original copper cornice, it retains a high degree of historic integrity.

(Photograph by Elizabeth S. Borden for the Chicago Historic Resources Survey)

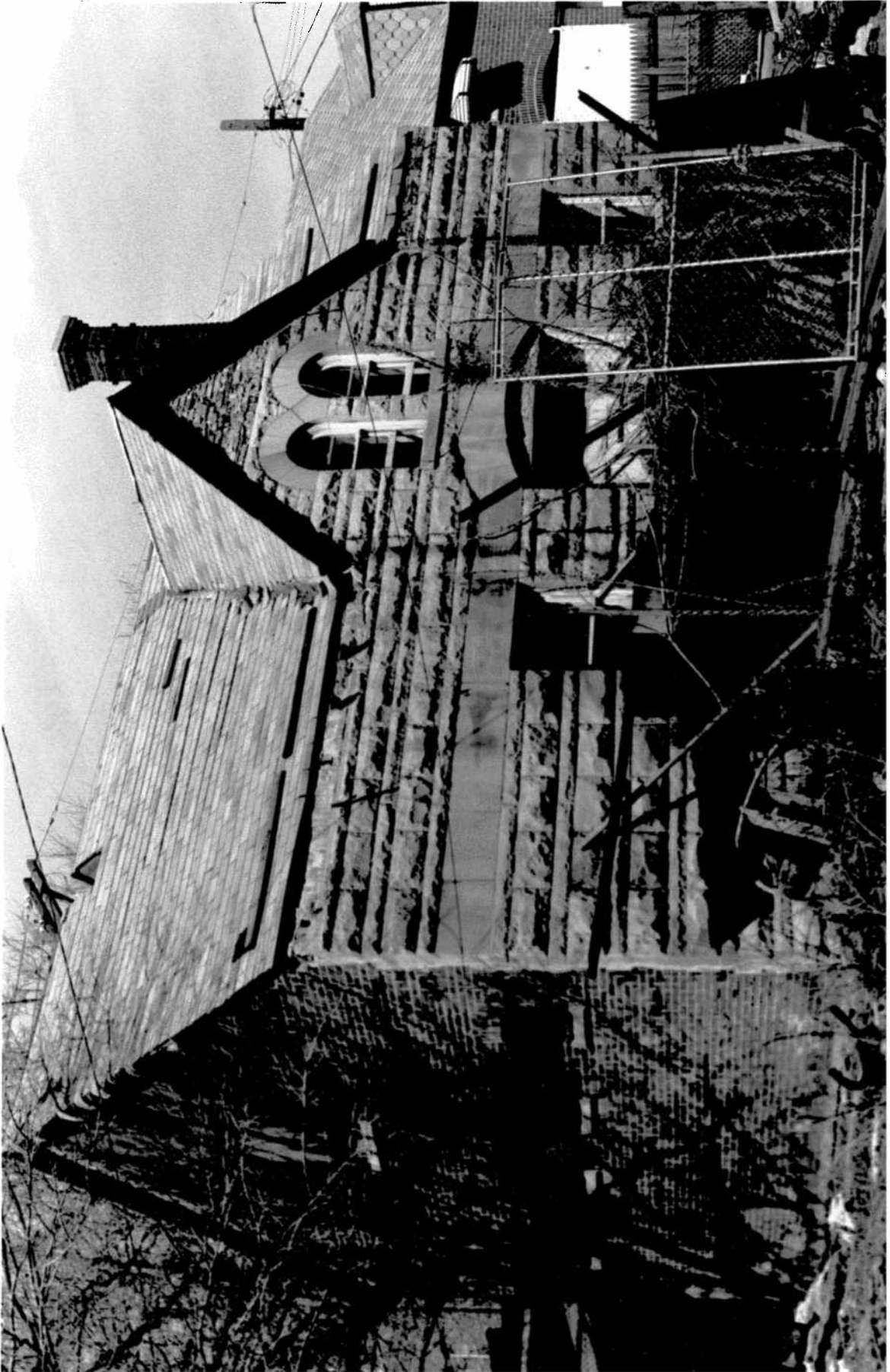


Figure 4: View of the Joseph Miksak House, 1958 South Avers Avenue, built in 1893. Like Kralovec, Miksak was engaged in real estate development in the Czech community, serving as president of the Pilsen Lumber Company.

(Photograph by Elizabeth S. Borden for the Chicago Historic Resources Survey)

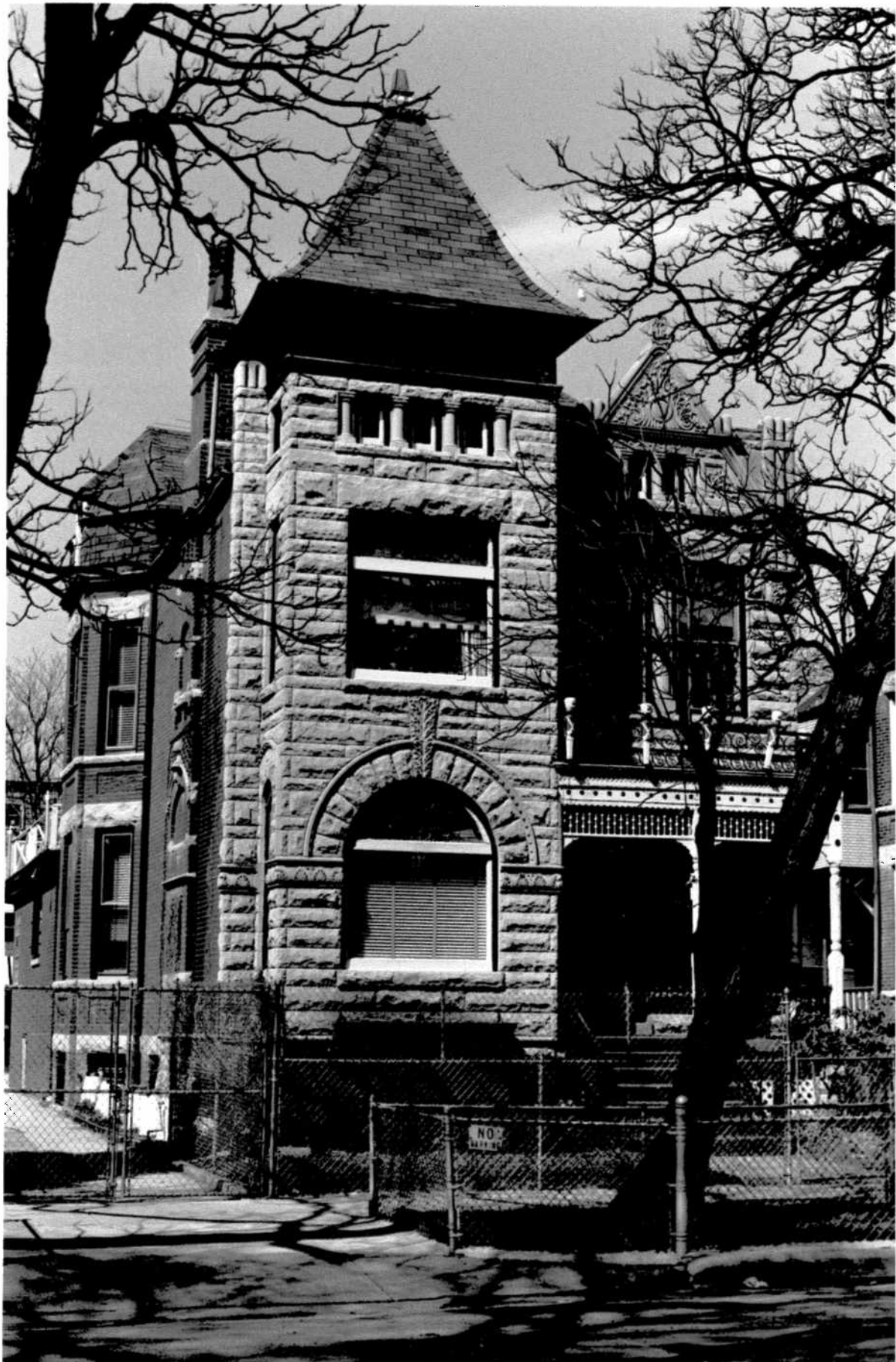


Figure 5: View of the John Krupka House, 1952 South Avers Avenue. The design of the Krupka House, from its overall elevation to most of its carved stone details, is identical with its neighbor, the Miksak House. The building permits for these two residences were applied for on the same day, May 6, 1893. The owners shared business interests, as Krupka was the secretary of Miksak's Pilsen Lumber Company, and they had formerly had their residences in the same flat building at 1808 South Racine Avenue in Pilsen.

(Photograph by Elizabeth S. Borden for the Chicago Historic Resources Survey)

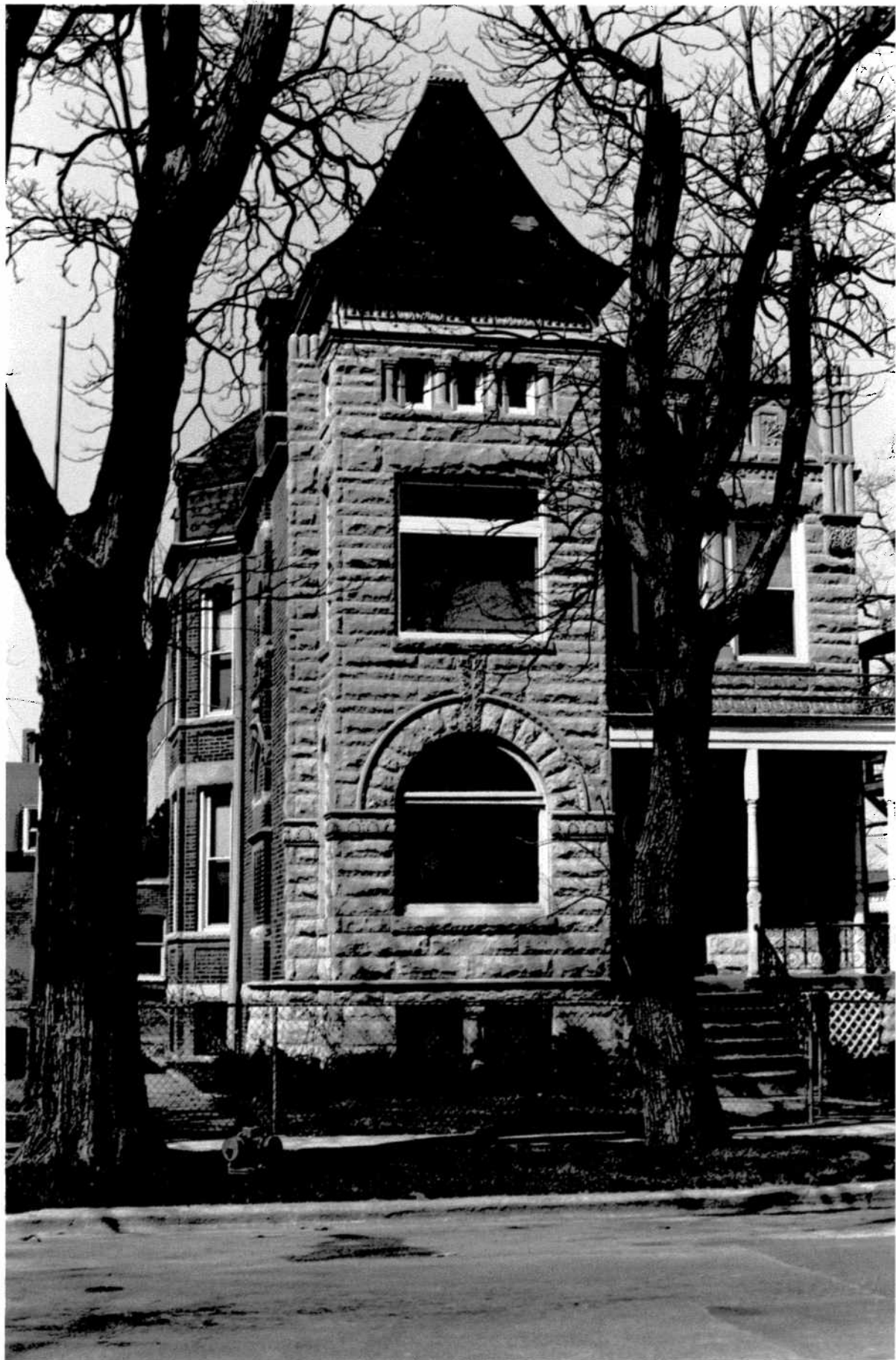


Figure 6: View of the residence built by Frank C. Layer at 1950 South Avers Avenue in 1893-94. Layer was the only owner of one of the Five Houses on Avers who never lived in his building.

(Photograph by Elizabeth S. Borden for the Chicago Historic Resources Survey)

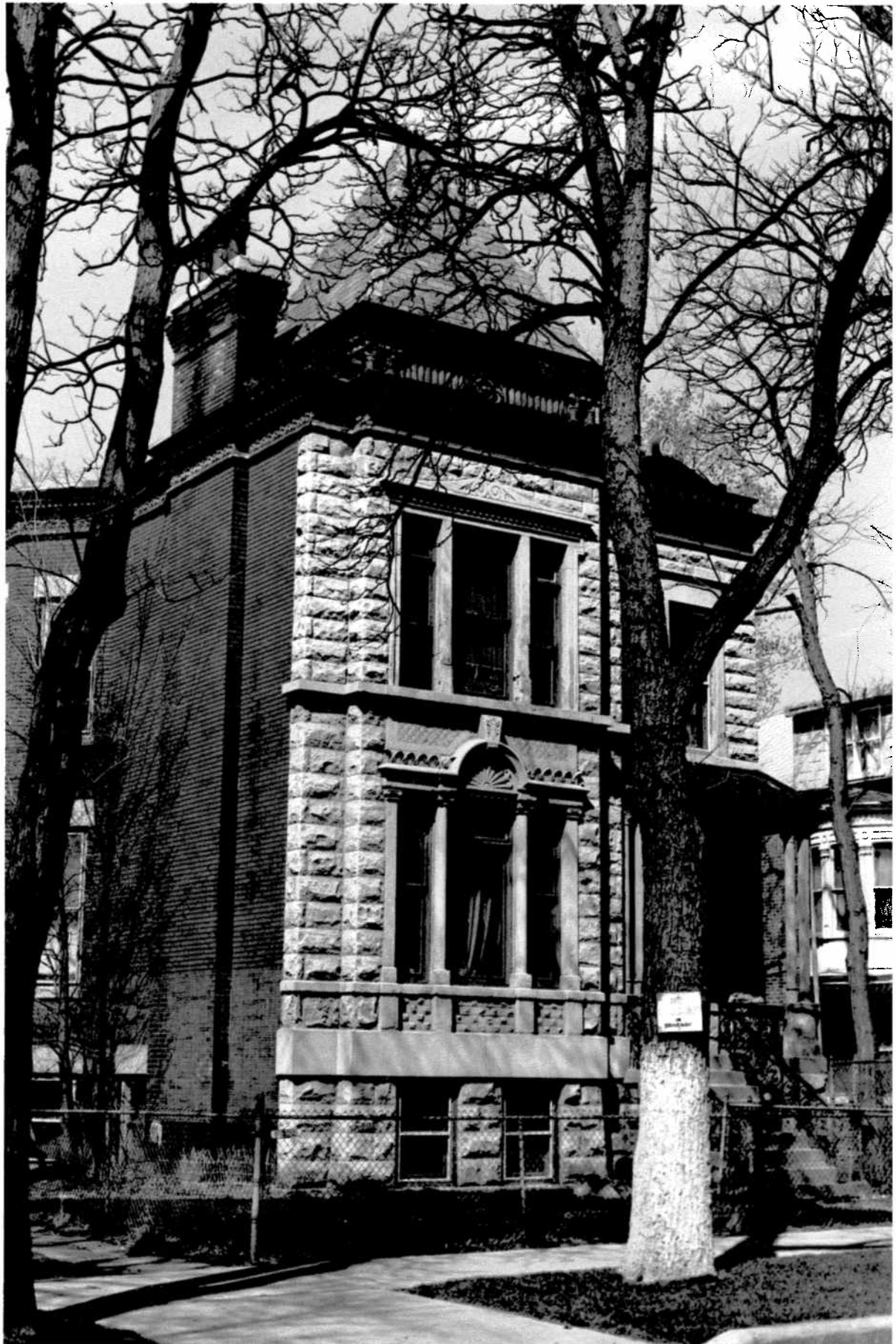


Figure 7: View of the two-flat built in 1894 for Antonie Kubin, the widow of Martin Kubin, at 1942 South Avers Avenue. Antonie was John Kralovec's sister-in-law, related by marriage to his wife, Julia Kubin Kralovec.

(Photograph by Elizabeth S. Borden for the Chicago Historic Resources Survey)



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Additional research material used in the preparation of this report is on file at the office of the Commission on Chicago Landmarks and is available to the public.

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